A UFO Legend Lands Up at Elite Defense Lab

A piece of metal said to be from space takes an odd, three-decade journey

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The Pentagon man gathered top technology executives from the six largest defense contractors in 2022 to ask an unusual question:

Have any of your companies ever gained access to alien technology?

“It would just make my job easier if one of you would ’fess up, give me the UFO, or help me find them,” said

Sean Kirkpatrick, who had been tapped by the Defense Department to investigate whether Washington had ever had a secret alien program.

The comment was made half jokingly, but for one company, Lockheed Martin, the answer was...complicated.

Lockheed’s Skunk Works lab—a legendary facility known for its work on some of the country’s most secret projects—had, in fact, just tested, and attempted to replicate, a piece of metal that was said to have been gathered from a crashed UFO outside Roswell, N.M. The U.S. Army wanted to know whether it could use the material to build vehicles that bend the conventional rules of gravity.

Spoiler alert: The idea didn’t fly. But the untold story behind the ersatz space metal turned out to be almost as strange as UFO fiction.

The metal went on a threedecade journey from a fringe legend fed by a late-night radio personality to the hands of a 1990s-era rock star to the elite testing lab of a top defense contractor.

It was just one of a series of episodes Kirkpatrick’s team dug into as it investigated claims that Washington

was hiding what it knew about a secret program to reverse-engineer fallen extraterrestrial spacecraft.

Along the way, Kirkpatrick’s investigation brought him into contact with a growing collection of UFO true believers from the Pentagon.

They included men whose careers had taken them to unconventional places in the outer reaches of the American intelligence community, where they explored the potential uses of psychic powers and teleportation in warfare—not to mention werewolves. Alleged evidence to support the whistleblowers' theories appeared to vanish just as Kirkpatrick got close to it.

By the time Kirkpatrick's inquiry wrapped up—culminating in a report last year by the Defense Department that found allegations of a government coverup to be baseless—his witnesses saw him, too, as part of the vast UFO coverup.

In a statement, Pentagon spokeswoman Sue Gough, said the investigation "has not discovered any verifiable information to substantiate claims that any programs regarding the possession or reverse-engineering of extraterrestrial materials have existed in the past or exist currently" and "determined that claims involving specific people, known locations, technological tests, and documents" that say otherwise "are inaccurate."

This account is based on interviews with two dozen current and former U.S. officials, scientists, and military contractors involved in the inquiry as well as thousands of pages of documents, emails, text messages and recordings.

Art's parts

In 1996, Art Bell, a late-night radio host whose program on the paranormal was one of the most popular in the country, received a mystery package in the mail. It contained metal fragments from an anonymous listener who wrote that their grandfather had collected them as part of a military crash-retrieval team at Roswell.

Roswell had long been a touchstone of UFO culture. In 1947, the Army announced it had recovered the remnants of a flying disc near a base there. Although the government eventually revealed it was really a U.S. spy balloon, there was no convincing many UFO buffs that the military wasn't harboring alien technology.

"They are metal, they are charred, very charred, on the outside, either a result of reentry or entry into the atmosphere, and the resulting heat, or a crash. I would have no way of knowing," Bell said on the show, before moving on to discuss sightings of a mythical creature known as the chupacabra, which is said to suck the blood of goats.

More than a decade later, two scientists who had worked with the Pentagon helped run a research program examining the possibilities of alien technology and explored "metamaterials," a type of synthetic substance. The program published research speculating that metamaterials could bestow aircraft with exotic powers such as invisibility.

Could the Bell sample be proof of the concept?

A group founded by Tom DeLonge, a frontman for the pop-punk band Blink-182, thought so. The group, called To The Stars, bought the pieces of metal from a UFO researcher in 2019 for $35,000 to test that possibility.

By then, To The Stars had assembled a collection of heavyweights including the two scientists and a former Pentagon official. The former official, Luis Elizondo, joined after quitting the Defense Department and going public with the claim that he had helped run a government UFO program.

One of the scientists, Hal Puthoff, became vice president for the group. The other, Eric Davis, who also became an adviser to the group, told the New York Times in 2020 that testing of the

sample had revealed it was not of this Earth. “We couldn’t make it ourselves,” he told the Times. (Davis would be a source of many of Kirkpatrick’s witness accounts.)

To The Stars made the case to the Army that replicating this material could unlock futuristic weapons systems. The Army soon signed an agreement to test the metal for potential anti-gravity and cloaking properties.

The safe

Elizondo had experience with some of the Pentagon’s stranger programs.

The combat veteran and counterintelligence specialist had been involved in one $22 million project, championed by the late Sen. Harry Reid, which hypothesized about technology that might be used by aliens. The program also investigated purported sightings of glowing orbs, interdimensional visitors, and two-legged wolf creatures that were allegedly occurring around a remote ranch in northeastern Utah. In 2017, he quit the Defense Department and said in a resignation letter that “inflexible mindsets” were causing the Pentagon to possibly ignore “an existential threat to our national security.”

It was Elizondo who provided one of Kirkpatrick’s most tantalizing leads. Tattooed and buff like the bouncer he once was at a Miami sports bar, Elizondo told Kirkpatrick he was prepared to share with him what he knew of a secret government program that had collected extraterrestrial “biologics.” He said he had hard evidence of the UFO findings he had collected for the Pentagon—information he had declined to make public, citing national security.

Where can we find out more about this? Kirkpatrick asked.

There’s a safe in my old office that has all of the files on a hard drive, Elizondo replied. A former colleague at the Pentagon had just confirmed a few days ago the device was still there, he said.

Hours after hearing of Elizondo’s evidence, agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Air Force’s investigations unit cordoned the office and gathered with a drill to break open the safe. As they approached it, they realized the drawer wasn’t actually locked. When they opened it, they found yet another surprise: It was empty.

A secret project

Kirkpatrick reached out to Elizondo’s onetime boss in the office of the undersecretary of defense for intelligence, who also seemed to have little to share. The official said he had never heard about any alien project in their years of working together.

In the weeks before his October 2017 resignation, Elizondo sent a series of emails that he later used to support his story.

“I can’t overstate how important I believe this portfolio is with respect to our collective National Security,” Elizondo wrote in one, asking for support for the unidentified project. The former boss responded, “at some point I need to know what this actually ‘is.’” In another, sent 10 days before his departure, Elizondo attached a brief memo that referenced drone threats. The emails were later released by the Pentagon in response to public-records requests.

Elizondo told another supervisor after his resignation that he hadn’t briefed him on the project because it was too secret and was directed by the Secretary of Defense himself.

In an email, Elizondo told the Journal he had informed the supervisor. He said that he sat with investigators for several hours and provided information on the U.S. government histor-

ical efforts on unidentified anomalous phenomena.
The Pentagon spokeswoman said Elizondo had no assigned responsibilities for the UFO program he had claimed to have worked on.
Meanwhile, Kirkpatrick's investigators continued on the trail of the metal. They discovered that the Army had sent it for possible replication to Lockheed Martin's Skunk Works— the same place a series of witnesses had said was trying to reverse-engineer alien craft.
The myth that the government had a secret program to exploit extraterrestrial technology seemed to have transformed into something close to reality.
Kirkpatrick's team procured the metal, and sent it for another round of testing to Oak Ridge National Laboratory, one of the Energy Department's premier research facilities. Scientists there determined that the alloy isn't from outer space and doesn't have antigravity properties. Kirkpatrick's team found it was probably from a World War II-era manufacturing test of an aircraft part or an armament, such as a shell casing.
Lockheed declined to comment and referred questions to the Army.
Giant spacecraft
Kirkpatrick's relationship with the UFO community soon grew contentious.
In April 2023, Kirkpatrick gave lawmakers a public update: He'd "found no credible evidence thus far of extraterrestrial activity, off-world technology, or objects that defy the known laws of physics."
A few months later, a former Air Force intelligence officer, David Grusch publicly claimed that the government had football-field-sized spacecraft and criticized Kirkpatrick. "He should be able to make the same investigative discoveries that I did," Grusch said in a television interview.
After the claims, Kirkpatrick reached out to a friend of Grusch to see if he would talk. The friend said Grusch was reluctant because he believed Kirkpatrick himself might be subject to a criminal investigation of the alleged coverup. Instead Grusch went before Congress and the media, accusing the government of retaliating against whistleblowers in the ranks.
Grusch has since gone to work as an adviser to Rep. Eric Burlison (R, Mo.), a member of the House caucus on unidentified anomalous phenomena, or UAP, and in that capacity recently met with Kirkpatrick's successor on the investigation.
High security
Threats against Kirkpatrick began to escalate. Pentagon's security officials notified him that people were posting the addresses of him and family members on UFO internet forums. Several months earlier, a man had driven hundreds of miles to Kirkpatrick's rural mountaintop home and waited overnight before being shooed away by neighbors.
The Pentagon gave Kirkpatrick a level of security usually reserved for a few top officials, including the Secretary of Defense.
In November 2023, Kirkpatrick announced his retirement. In an essay in the Scientific American two months later, he wrote that the narrative provided by the former officials "is a textbook example of circular reporting, with each person relaying what they heard, but the information often ultimately being sourced to the same small group of individuals."